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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETINGS IN COLONIA TOVAR AND VALENCIA

REF: CARACAS 1217

CARACAS 00001224 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶11. (C) Summary. The Ambassador traveled August 29-30 to Colonia Tovar and Valencia. Aragua State Governor Didalco Bolivar and Colonia Tovar Mayor Esteban Bocaranda underscored that tourist town Colonia Tovar's economic success is due to private sector dynamism, not the small amount of government spending the municipality receives. The Ambassador visited a NAS-funded demand reduction baseball clinic August 30 in Valencia and reinforced in comments to local media the importance of bilateral counternarcotics cooperation. While the Ambassador did not say anything new, President Chavez, on the August 31 broadcast of his "Alo, Presidente" talk show program, warned the Ambassador to "watch his words" or "start packing his bags" (Septel). In a private lunch, Carabobo State opposition gubernatorial candidate Henrique Salas Feo told the Ambassador he expects the opposition will win only five or six (of 22) governorships (including his race) in November's state and local elections. End Summary.

Colonia Tovar

¶12. (SBU) Ambassador attended on August 29 the 70th anniversary of the Selva Negra hotel, the most prominent hotel of Colonia Tovar, a popular tourist destination with a large German population nestled in the mountains of Aragua State. The German ambassador, Colonia Tovar mayor Esteban Bocaranda, and Aragua State governor Didalco Bolivar, a former Chavez ally, also attended. In his remarks to the dozens of invited guests, Bolivar stressed that "leaders who seek the votes of persons with private property should also respect that private property after they get elected." Bolivar praised Colonia Tovar for its private sector dynamism, which he noted generated significant income with minimal government spending.

¶13. (C) In a follow-on meeting with the four-time Colonia Tovar mayor, Bocaranda told the Ambassador that he expects to win a fifth term of office (a second consecutive term under the 1999 Constitution) in November's state and local elections. Bocaranda, a former Christian Democrat, is running on his own municipal "Strawberry" party ticket and was one of only a few opposition-oriented politicians to unseat a pro-government incumbent in the last state and local elections. Bocaranda noted that the BRV and Chavez's United

Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) are offering considerable pre-election "give-aways" in an effort to boost the electoral chances of his PSUV opponent. Four "Che Guevara" social project trailers were conspicuously parked near the town entrance.

¶ 14. (C) Bocaranda noted that the Colonia Tovar municipality encompasses not just the well-known tourist town, but 61 villages in the surrounding countryside. He noted that some of the 29 villages established informally over the last several years still lack electricity and running water. Bocaranda said these villages vote overwhelmingly pro-government.

Valencia

¶ 15. (SBU) The Ambassador visited August 30 a NAS-funded demand reduction baseball clinic in a working class neighborhood of Valencia, Carabobo State. The five-day "Baseball and Friendship" program provides counterdrug counseling to coaches, parents, and Little League players and also promotes bilateral understanding through baseball. In on-site comments to journalists at the event, the Ambassador underscored the importance of the program (conducted in six cities so far this year). He also reiterated the USG's overall interest in renewing counternarcotics cooperation with the Venezuelan government. Although the Ambassador repeated statements he has made earlier, President Chavez accused the Ambassador of "intromission" and threatened to expel him from Venezuela if he did not "watch his words" (Septel).

¶ 16. (C) Former Carabobo State governor and current opposition gubernatorial candidate Henrique Salas Feo hosted the

CARACAS 00001224 002.3 OF 002

Ambassador for a private lunch at his Valencia home August 130. Salas Feo shared with the Ambassador the results of a local (Pronostico) August poll which shows that he leads PSUV candidate and government TV talk show host Mario Silva 50 percent to 24 percent. Salas also said his father, a former Carabobo State governor and 1998 presidential candidate, leads Mario Silva 61 percent to 21 percent. Salas Feo suggested that the Comptroller did not declare him ineligible to run because BRV officials realized that his father could also run and win. Salas Feo, like Didalco Bolivar (Reftel), believes Chavez is trying to wrest control from state and local governments. He anticipates that after November the biggest political conflicts will not be between Chavistas and the opposition, but rather between the central government and state/local governments.

¶ 17. (C) Salas Feo said he is campaigning on his record against the poor record of the PSUV incumbent, Luis Felipe Acosta Carlez. He avoids running against Chavez or Chavez's recent 26 decree-laws because he believes that would play to the PSUV's strength. He said the PSUV, despite its internal differences, gives any candidate a floor of 30 percent of the electorate, while among the opposition, prominent politicians enjoy more popular support than their respective parties. He accused Acosta Carlez and Valencia independent mayoral candidate Abdala Makled of facilitating the flow of illicit drugs from Puerto Cabello. Running against them, he added, involves real danger. Salas Feo blamed Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales, whom he accused of acting like a "dictator," for divisions among the opposition. Salas Feo expects the opposition will win only five or six gubernatorial races in November.

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